

Halimah Mohd Said, Kalaivani Nadarajah, Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja and Asma Abdullah, eds. *History for Nation Building*. Kuala Lumpur: PCORE, 2018. 204 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-83-7.

Malaysia has arrived at an exciting moment in its history. With the result of its fourteenth general election (GE14), which took place on 9 May 2018, the 61-year rule of Barisan Nasional (BN) has come to an end. BN's rule, which was marked mostly by its communitarian approach, has hitherto set the tone for how the Malaysian public spaces approach their social discourses, including on the understanding of the country's history. By extension, nation building has come to mirror the image of the racialised perimeters of BN's – particularly UMNO's – politics.

How, then, will the post-GE14 scenario change the way Malaysians approach and understand their country's nation building process? An optimistic view will see this as an opportunity for Malaysia to turn the leaf towards a discourse that embraces a process which is accepting of a plurality of voices, for the sake of attaining an inclusive nation. On the other hand, Malaysians can also be warned of the spectres of the Malay-centric discourse continuing to beset future conversations, in ways that disrupt hopes for an encompassing future.

Largely, *History for Nation Building*, published before but reviewed here after GE14, adopts the more optimistic, hopeful stance. In analysing the role of history in Malaysia's nation building process, the book mainly highlights longstanding issues with the way history has been taught and narrated in educational institutions specifically, and, more generally, in the public spaces. Its objective is to see how a sense of belonging can be inculcated through a shared history of all Malaysians, by way of a more inclusive approach to history education. As put by Rais Yatim early on in the book, "(e)ach Malaysian community must... see that in each history textbook there is a record of their community's contribution to nation building" (20).

Edited by Halimah Mohd Said, Kalaivani Nadarajah, Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja and Asma Abdullah, *History for Nation Building* is a collection of papers that were presented at a conference organised by the Association of Voices of Peace, Conscience and Reason (PCORE) and University of Malaya's Department of History, on 22 October 2016. In addition to the conference papers, which have been re-written as chapters, the book has an "Afterword" section that contains discussions (including questions and answers) from the conference panels as well as general and specific recommendations for improving history education in Malaysia.

While authors observe the theme of "history for nation building" in their chapters, they discuss a diversity of issues from different perspectives. As alluded to above, Rais's Keynote Address, which appears as Chapter 3 in the book, calls

for a rethinking of the way Malaysia's education system tells the country's history, so as to allow for the emergence of a history that appreciates the contributions of all Malaysians, including "protagonists, antagonists, individuals and groups" (20). In the next chapter, Khoo Kay Kim argues for a history education that will encourage Malaysians to look at events and issues from perspectives that are based on sound evidence. In Chapter 5, Helen Ting Mu Hung calls for the cultivation of a civic spirit which is informed by an awareness of Malaysia's multicultural history. In Chapter 6, Mohd Arof Ishak, contrary to Ting's assertion that there is a "strong Malay bias" (32) in Malaysia's history textbooks, suggests that attempts to narrate history from perspectives that are not Malay-centric will be a "contrived form of history" (36). Alluding to a kind of genetic sovereignty of the Malay people over others (e.g. the Chinese and the Indians), Mohd Arof argues that Malaysia's history has to be told in a "balanced" way, by which he means, first and foremost, telling the "narrative of the Malay world," and then telling a "country narrative... as part of the history of Malaysia" (43), a formula which he believes will encourage integration. Next, in Chapter 7, Danny Wong Tse Ken raises an issue that has for some time become a major point of political discussion, the position of Sabah and Sarawak in the context of Malaysian national identity. Specifically, Wong presents a brief genealogical account of the name Sabah, and demonstrates how it has been interpreted at different junctures of Sabah's history. Finally, Wong shows the importance of the name Sabah in shaping the Sabahan identity. Likewise, in Chapter 14, Bilcher Bala demonstrates the failure of the BN-led federal government in accounting for the importance of East Malaysia to the rest of the country. Using school history textbooks as examples, Bala highlights a series of problems, ranging from unfair coverage to factual inaccuracy to discrimination of Sabah and Sarawak history in the textbooks.

While the above chapters deal with the more general and philosophical aspects of Malaysia's history and how it has been taught, others discuss more specific topics. Echoing the above issues, which have affected the way history is presented to young Malaysians, Lim Teck Ghee, in Chapter 8, argues for a greater involvement of the civil society in trying to present a truer history of Malaysia. Specifically, Lim highlights the work that Kempen Sejarah Malaysia Sebenar (KemSMS) has done to reverse the attempts of BN's "propaganda bureaus" to "rewrite history" (54) to favour the latter's political domination. In chapter 9, Lee Kam Hing highlights the contributions of historical narratives as told by not only "trained historians" (65), but also groups and people who work outside the official institutional spheres, through the use of technological innovations and interdisciplinary methods in collecting, interpreting and presenting historical data. In Chapter 10, Hisham Harun Hashim demonstrates, through a reading of documents and materials from his family archive, the role that family history can play as a source of a people's history. In responding to the problems on how

history is taught in schools, Tunku Munawirah Putra in chapter 11 argues for a revised history curriculum, which would take into account the views of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students and the general public.

In chapter 12, Tai Zee Kin suggests innovative ways to construct historical narratives so as to appeal to Malaysia's youth. In the next chapter, Satinah Syed Saleh emphasises the importance of developing a history curriculum that accurately represents Malaysia's multicultural setup. Chapters 15 and 16, by Ummadevi Suppiah and Sivachandaralingam respectively, argue for innovative teaching methods which can help to highlight the value and importance of history as a subject.

Overall, the sentiments that are expressed by most of the chapters fall in line with the hopes that have ushered in Malaysia's post-GE political situation. Fundamentally, *History for Nation Building* suggests that Malaysians will need to put difficult issues on the table for a frank and open discussion. This may well begin with an interrogation of the official narratives of history.

The way forward, as argued convincingly by Shamsul Amri Baharuddin in the Afterword section of the book, is to include the "narratives of all groups of people, using both vertical (all classes) and horizontal (all social groups) perspectives" (143). It should therefore be observed that an attempt at reforming how Malaysia's history is told should move away from seeing Malaysia as only a collection of cultural, ethnic or religious communities. However, Shamsul's point is mentioned only in passing towards the end of the book. As it is, the major issues that are raised in *History for Nation Building* are discussed against a rather essentialised understanding of notions such as "culture," "race," or "community." Hence, while a criticism of Malay-centric history is sustained throughout the book, we find that a good number of the proposals call for the *representation* – in a "fairer" way – of the other communities within an expanded "multicultural" framework.

However, identity can also take a form that does not conform to essentialised views of culture. Throughout Malaysia's history, there have been perspectives that have challenged the belief that categories such as race (and even religion) should take a leading part in shaping a shared national identity in Malaysia. Many of those who hold to such views have been and are still confined to the margins of the public debates on nation building in Malaysia. Their voices are absent in this book. If the objective is indeed to ultimately broaden the register of recognition – for identities and groups that have hitherto been ignored or even marginalised – it is important that longstanding essentialisms are challenged. In fact, even an Orang Asli perspective is absent in the book, and, unfortunately, this is only left to Mohd Arof, who conjectures – based on his race biological view – that the Orang Aslis occupy a position which is as preeminent as the Malays (42) in Malaysia.

In any case, in the hope of a more inclusive nation building, alternative perspectives must be heard and shape a future Malaysian identity. For example, voices from the Left can show us that the grip of the category of race on Malaysia's collective political psyche is a legacy of colonial capitalism, which can be deconstructed in the name of a more equal economy. Indeed, simultaneously, Malay politics itself, beginning with the formation of Kesatuan Melayu Muda, has a side with a rich Leftist tradition, which has challenged mainstream, feudal interpretations of Malay history. It was through the Left that a multiracial political cooperation first came into reality, years before the Perikatan, BN's predecessor, was born. Also, sexuality, long maligned and disparaged in official discourses, will have stories to tell Malaysians, stories that can become resources for a better understanding of Malaysia's history. Add to this the perspective of gender, which would challenge masculine and, alongside sexuality, heteronormative readings of Malaysia's history. All these would speak to the inclusive spirit of *History for Nation Building*, a spirit that will now be even more accelerated in the new Malaysia.

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